

# From Tiger Cages to Soup Kitchens

**Exclusive:** As a young man, Don Luce crossed paths with history in Vietnam, evolving from a gung-ho U.S. aid worker into a persuasive opponent of the war, famously exposing the use of “tiger cages” to hold political prisoners, but his life took other remarkable turns, as Ted Lieberman describes.

By Ted Lieberman

On a wet, chilly Wednesday night in April 2013, Don Luce opens the weekly parolee class at Community Missions, a homeless shelter and soup kitchen in Niagara Falls, New York. The meetings are a loose collection of practical lessons useful for those trying to re-enter the outside world after prison: common grammar and vocabulary usage mistakes, basic statistical concepts, advice on work and educational opportunities.

Attendance is encouraged but not mandatory, and several of the students show up late, others don't make it at all, and one anxious woman wordlessly leaves within 15 minutes. A man called Angel happily announces that he has just been hired at a furniture store. Two guests, Carol and Marcia, are managers from Target, come to give pointers on job interviews.

Not surprisingly, the key question the parolees have is how to talk about their criminal convictions and prison sentences. “Don't lie,” warn the guests; openly talk about it but be sure to describe how you're not the same person anymore, how you've learned from the experience. “What if it was bad?” asks Desmond, an anxious parolee. How bad? Well, he cut another inmate. . . with a knife . . . and got sent to maximum confinement. He is now 21 years old.

Luce hears such stories often. He empathizes with the parolees and understands the difficulties they face. He has seen worse. In fact, Don Luce has spent most of his life working with prisoners – those in physical prisons made of iron and stone, and the metaphorical prisoners of poverty and war.

He lived and worked in Vietnam from 1958 until his expulsion in 1971, first as an aid worker, then a journalist; first a supporter of the American war effort, then a pacifist and war opponent. His sincerity and intimate knowledge of Vietnamese life – he is still fluent in Vietnamese, a notoriously difficult language for westerners to master – made his writings and speeches about Vietnam so effective that the last U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham Martin, testifying before Congress in 1976, paid Luce the ultimate back-handed compliment: that Luce was one of the principal reasons the U.S. lost the war.

## **Helping Others**

Luce's quiet courage, his dedication to helping those that Camus called the humiliated and debased, inspired a generation of young humanitarian volunteers who went to Vietnam. Jacqui Chagnon, an aid worker who met Luce in Vietnam in the late 1960s, said Luce "was probably one of the most formative people in my life for my values and for the way I was to work in the future."

Fred Branfman, who displayed his own remarkable courage exposing the U.S. bombing of Laos during the four years he was there, called Luce a "genuine American hero" – incredibly courageous, very little ego, total commitment to protecting the Vietnamese.

Luce is perhaps best remembered for helping members of the U.S. Congress uncover the infamous "tiger cage" prison cells in South Vietnam in 1970. Less well-known are his successes in helping convince North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces to release American journalists from custody, and persuading a South Vietnamese warden to release student activists through the liberal application of Johnny Walker and Marlboros.

Just turned 80, Luce still travels to Vietnam regularly, and is still working full-time closer to home to aid the poor and dispossessed. In his thirties and forties, he says, he tried to change the big policies; "now I try to concentrate on helping a few people have an easier life." Now, he says, he looks at life "from a Niagara Falls soup kitchen perspective."

## **The Aid Worker**

Luce grew up on a 220-acre farm in East Calais, Vermont, a small village of some 200 people. A family caregiver told him stories about the work of missionaries in Africa, and he developed a strong desire to do good works overseas. Luce joined International Voluntary Services (IVS), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that was the model for the Peace Corps. IVS's biggest project was in South Vietnam, a country suffering from extreme poverty, autocratic government and a growing leftist insurgency but there were no U.S. combat troops there yet. IVS received virtually all of the money for its Vietnam program from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

In 1958, Luce saw himself as a typical farm boy with no real interest in politics. He thought Dwight Eisenhower was a good president, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles a great man, and American support for South Vietnam important in saving America from communism. On Nov. 9, 1958, he arrived in South Vietnam and was sent to Ban Me Thuot, a provincial capital in the Central Highlands largely populated with Catholics who, at the urging of the Americans and South

Vietnamese officials, had fled the communist North.

For the first month, he studied the Vietnamese language with a 15 year-old boy, much of the instruction transmitted by playing the Vietnamese dice game called Horse. By Christmas Eve, Luce was able to appear at the local church and give a simple speech, which Luce describes as, "Hello, my name is Don. I am fine. I am glad to be in Viet Nam. Thank you very much." His language skills improved as he worked to introduce a higher yielding strain of sweet potatoes to the peasant farmers.

### **Life in Saigon**

In 1960, Luce became associate country director for IVS and moved to Saigon; in 1961, he was appointed IVS Country Director for Vietnam. During his time as director, the IVS mission widened its mission from agricultural advice to include teaching and community development, and it also started accepting female volunteers; by 1967, IVS had 120 volunteers in Vietnam.

Luce was known for being soft-spoken and relying on a low-keyed, understated style of leadership. He was very calm, stable, and confident, but he worked constantly, was very determined, "consumed with the Vietnamese cause," in the words of one former volunteer.

Gloria Emerson, the *New York Times* correspondent in Vietnam for three years, described Luce as "a gentle and austere man, born without a temper, almost unable to return anger." Carl Robinson of Associated Press later referred to him as "a deceptively calm and unemotional person."

When conflict arose, Luce generally avoided personal attacks to focus on institutional or policy failures. He believed that people doing bad things could generally be convinced that their conduct was wrong, or counterproductive, and could change. Asked about his calm approach, Luce quotes a line from the poetry of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, "Remember, brother, remember / Man is not our enemy."

The IVS volunteers in Vietnam were idealistic and motivated to do good, but it was hard for them to ignore the effects of the conflict. Luce himself began having doubts about the efficacy of the American effort.

A speech by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara in 1964 seemed to symbolize the problem. McNamara had come to Saigon for consultations on the war and later addressed a large crowd of civil servants and Saigonese supporters of the government. Luce was there with some of his students.

At the end of his remarks in English, McNamara raised his arms in the air to

shout in Vietnamese, "*Viet Nam muon nam*," intending to say "Vietnam will win." Unfortunately for the Secretary, Vietnamese is a tonal language in which words have very different meanings depending on the accent and inflection. What McNamara had actually said to the bemused crowd astute enough to nevertheless cheer loudly was "The southern duck wants to lie down."

### **Growing Doubts**

As the American military effort in Vietnam ratcheted up in 1965, IVS found itself being dragged into the conflict. Some were killed, and a number of IVS staff started to openly question the merits of their own work. By 1967, Luce and others decided that their work with IVS could not really help the Vietnamese in the midst of the American war effort.

At a big staff meeting over the July Fourth weekend in 1967, Luce and three other senior staff announced they were resigning from IVS. A group of volunteers together drafted a letter to President Lyndon Johnson expressing their dismay with the war; 49 volunteers signed the letter. A group of IVSers presented the letter to U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon. Luce says the Ambassador was "cordial" but called their handling of the letter and resignations "unethical and discourteous."

Vice President Hubert Humphrey later called the IVS resignations "one of the greatest disservices to the American effort in Viet Nam." On the other hand, many Vietnamese were supportive of the letter. One Vietnamese acquaintance said, "We thought you were CIA but now we know differently." Luce began to be noticed in the press.

Luce returned to the U.S. in September 1967 and spent several months at Cornell University as a research associate, and also gave speeches around the country on his misgivings about the war. Luce and former IVS team leader John Sommer also used that year to write a book, *Vietnam: The Unheard Voices*, which Luce saw as an extension of their letter to President Johnson, describing the terrible destruction that the war was causing.

The book had an impact because it was written by Americans who spoke the language, and knew a good deal about the culture of Vietnam from spending long days and weeks with peasants, slum dwellers, internal refugees and students. It was not so much an analysis of American strategy as a description of what was happening to the Vietnamese.

"We were trying to find a way to give the Vietnamese a voice in the debate," Luce says.

In mid-1968, Luce returned to Vietnam, this time funded by the World Council of

Churches to ostensibly write a report on post-war reconstruction assuming there would be a post-war. Luce understood his mandate more broadly, to “do what you feel is important to be done in Vietnam.”

Most of his efforts went into freelance journalism – but he quickly learned that his authorship did not count for much with the press and tried a different approach. He worked with his Vietnamese friends and acquaintances to uncover stories about prisons, poverty, refugees in the camps and urban slums, and what the voluntary agencies were doing.

### **Living Above a Brothel**

Luce lived in a top floor apartment of a seventh-floor walk-up on Avenue Louis Pasteur in the heart of Saigon; the floors below him housed a brothel for American soldiers. Luce used to spend time in conversation with the sex workers and got to know a number of them well; he saw them as similar in many ways to the political prisoners, being degraded and held hostage by the war.

In late 1969 or early 1970, some of his Saigon students asked Luce to assist in freeing a student being held prisoner at Thu Duc prison on the outskirts of Saigon. How do I do that, Luce asked in confusion. Simple, said the students, you’re an American, you can do anything. The warden likes Johnny Walker; take him a bottle and a carton of Marlboro cigarettes.

Luce tried it, purchasing his gifts from the American PX. He offered the warden the carton of Marlboros, and they shared a drink from the bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label that Luce had brought . . . then another, then more. After a while, the warden was in a very friendly mood and Luce, who rarely drank alcohol, was close to drunk.

Luce started, you have one of my students here, he’s very anticommunist, pro-American (Luce was inventing here), can’t you release him to my custody? The warden initially shook his head, saying “You Americans don’t understand.” Luce kept asking, can’t you give me just this one? Finally, the warden ordered an aide to go get the prisoner in question: “I don’t want him anymore.”

The freed prisoner laughed hysterically with happiness and relief as they drove back to town, and they were met by joyous students. “We didn’t think you could really do it,” one told Luce.

Luce tried this on another half dozen trips, always bringing a bottle of Johnny Walker and a carton of Marlboros. The warden was always pleasant but did not always release a prisoner – though once he released three prisoners at one time. Luce did not visit the warden again after July 1970; after the tiger cages incident, “he probably would have shot me.”

## **Freeing Journalists**

Luce even succeeded in aiding the release of imprisoned Americans. In May 1970, three American journalists were captured while reporting in Cambodia: Richard Dudman of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, Michael Morrow of Dispatch News Service, and Elizabeth Pond of the *Christian Science Monitor*. No one knew initially who held them, although it was suspected that they had been captured by either Viet Cong or North Vietnamese troops.

Luce knew the reporters and wanted to do something to assist in their release. He was sure that some of his students were secretly connected to the liberation forces but didn't know which ones. During class, he told his students that the three reporters were decent, honest journalists and that if any of the students had any contacts that might assist in their release, he hoped that they would pass the word.

Soon after that, Luce received a message by word of mouth, telling him that some people would like to talk to him about the reporters. He was instructed to go to Brodard, a fancy bakery and ice cream parlor on Tu Do (now renamed Dong Khoi) Street in Saigon, at a certain time, and that he would be invited to join some people.

Luce went to the parlor at the appointed time and sat down. After a few minutes, a friendly Vietnamese man invited Luce to join him and his friend. The two Vietnamese had heard about banana splits and ordered one each. As they ate, Luce answered questions about the three reporters and passed around articles they had written.

On June 15, the three journalists were freed on Highway 1 inside Cambodia and got a ride to Saigon on South Vietnamese Army trucks. Luce received another message thanking him for his "important" information which had been helpful, and that his friends had been released.

As it happens, Luce was not the only one working on the journalists' release. Unknown to him, Pham Xuan An, North Vietnam's top spy in the South whose cover was a writer for *Time* Magazine and who had been Pond's interpreter, conveyed his own messages to the North Vietnamese military command, urging them to free his friends.

As Luce says, "It's one of those things you never know, beyond the banana split, just what happened."

## **Uncovering the Tiger Cages**

Undoubtedly, Luce is principally famous – or infamous, depending on one's views

– for his role in uncovering the “tiger cages,” tiny prison cells used by the South Vietnamese government to hold recalcitrant prisoners.

In 1970, Con Son prison – located on the principal island of the Con Dau archipelago, some 60 miles off of the coast of South Vietnam – housed almost 10,000 prisoners, of which some 500 were political prisoners kept in small cages in a walled-off section. Luce had heard about the tiger cages and relayed what he knew to Tom Harkin, then a Congressional staff aide to a delegation of Congressmen visiting Vietnam (Harkin was later elected to the U.S. Senate).

Harkin arranged to have two of the Congressmen travel to Con Son and try to uncover the secret tiger cages – cages that the South Vietnamese and U.S. governments said no longer existed. They succeeded in a dramatic fashion, bringing out a first-hand account and photographs of the miserable conditions.

The tiger cage story, coming out shortly after the American invasion of Cambodia and the widespread campus demonstrations (including the killing of four students at Kent State by Ohio National Guard troops), received widespread international coverage in which Luce was frequently quoted. The South Vietnamese government soon announced that the tiger cage unit was being demolished and treatment of prisoners upgraded.

The South Vietnamese government took a dim view of Luce’s activities, particularly the attention given to Con Son prison. In October 1970, the Saigon government informed Luce that his press card would be revoked. Luce’s landlady, happy to run a large brothel but nervous about tenants who criticized the government, evicted him.

Now Luce was followed while walking around the city. He came home to his new apartment one night to find the door broken, his papers searched, and a poisonous snake tied inside of his bed sheets. On April 17, 1971, Luce received an official letter expelling him from the country and left two weeks later.

### **The Activist**

Now back in the U.S., Luce became a full-time antiwar activist. He and other IVS veterans created the Indochina Mobile Education Project, affiliated with the Indochina Resource Center and Project Air War, three nonprofits operating from a small four-story office building just off Dupont Circle in Washington.

He and most of the staff spent their time touring the country in two minivans, named Winnie Wham and Dangerous Dan, to talk about the war and its effects on both Vietnam and America. They hit almost every state in the continental U.S. and spent a lot of time in small towns. The main event always featured a Vietnamese dinner which Don and his team would cook, usually *thich ga* (stewed

chicken) and *goi ga* (chicken salad made with cabbage). Dinner cost \$4 to \$5 and was an effective draw, generally netting anywhere from 100 to 125 people.

Chagnon remembers Luce as a persuasive speaker, quiet but firm, speaking about values, not ideology. Luce would say – truthfully – that he was just a farm boy and proceed from there. Their days often lasted from 6 a.m. until 11 p.m.; Chagnon says it was like being part of a political campaign.

Not everyone reacted well to the antiwar message. In Augusta Georgia, a man announced he wanted to kill Luce for being a foreigner. “I’m from Vermont,” Luce protested. “I told you you’re a foreigner,” the man replied and began to choke Luce. Later, Luce’s office/living quarters in Washington were firebombed; he remembered how his green telephone melted from the heat with plastic icicles dripping down.

### **Backhanded Compliment**

If Luce wondered about his effectiveness in hastening the end of the Vietnam War, he may have been somewhat reassured by the back-handed compliment he received from Graham Martin, the last U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam.

Testifying before a subcommittee of the House Committee on International Relations on Jan. 27, 1976, Martin assured Congress that the final collapse of the South Vietnamese government had nothing to do with the policies of Saigon or Washington, but was caused “by one of the best propaganda and pressure organizations the world has ever seen,” largely organized by the Indochina Resource Center and “the multi-faceted activities of Mr. Don Luce. . . . [T]hose individuals deserve enormous credit for a very effective performance.”

Apparently too effective under the circumstances, as Martin continued, “I think we ought to look with some precision at organizations and their origins, their background and their affiliations, who are trying to influence American foreign policy.”

Columnist Mary McGrory observed in the *New York Post*, “For those who know the [Indochina Resource] center, which is a shoestring enterprise quartered in a grubby house on 18th Street, it was a little grotesque.”

### **Moving to Niagara Falls**

In 1979, while working in New York, Luce met Mark Bonacci, and they have been together ever since. They moved to Niagara Falls in 1981, where Luce was doing some part-time teaching. Bonacci began teaching at Niagara Falls Community College, where he is now a tenured professor.



In 1979, Edward J. Rasen, a freelance journalist, sought Luce's help to get an exclusive interview with Pham Van Dong, then prime minister of the unified Vietnam, an iron-willed revolutionary compatriot of Ho Chi Minh and General Giap.

Rasen thought that Luce's good contacts with the Vietnamese might secure the interview, but there was one potential problem: he was selling the interview to *Penthouse* magazine, where the readership was primarily driven by the copious display of naked female flesh.

Luce arranged a meeting with the staff at the Vietnamese delegation to the United Nations in New York. Here's the advantage of doing the interview, Luce said: *Penthouse* had a large circulation in the U.S. (the publisher boasted that it exceeded five million worldwide at that time), particularly among two groups, members of the U.S. military and residents of Washington, D.C. The disadvantage, Luce continued, was, well- and here he handed out about a dozen back issues and suggested they look through them to understand what kind of content the magazine was based on.

Luce believed that the Vietnamese, though generally modest, did not have the same sexual hang-ups that existed in the U.S., and so he was not surprised that the government approved the interview request.

Rasen conducted the interview of Dong during a Summit Meeting of the Nonaligned Nations in Havana, Cuba, in September 1979, with Luce sharing the interpreting with one of Dong's official interpreters. *Penthouse* published the seven-page interview in its January 1980 issue, and both Rasen and Luce were given credit for the article.

## **A Shattered Land**

Rasen asked Luce for help on another, even bigger story. In December 1978, the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia to end the reign of the Khmer Rouge and was fighting its way across the country. Rasen wanted Luce to help an ABC camera crew explore the "liberated" areas and report on what had happened in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge.

Together with ABC correspondent Jim Laurie and a couple of Vietnamese and Cambodian minders, they drove their old Ford minivan from Saigon – now officially renamed Ho Chi Minh City – into Cambodia and across 11 of the 19 provinces for six weeks during the period November 1979-January 1980, conducting interviews and recording the almost complete destruction of Cambodian society. The documentary, *This Shattered Land*, aired on ABC on March 29, 1980.

Laurie, a seasoned journalist who stayed in Saigon for a month after the city

fell in 1975, has nothing but praise for Luce. Luce constantly pitched in with whatever needed to be done, and was always on the lookout for Vietnamese speakers so that he could do interviews without going through the minders. He had an intuitive quality for the work and a good sense of people; he could get good material in the interviews.

“Luce is the ultimate humanitarian,” he says, a man of character who was modest and understated and followed through on his promises. But Laurie also found him a man of mystery, quiet about his Vietnamese contacts.

For some reason, ABC had provisioned them with dozens of cans of peanuts. Whenever they stopped to eat, crowds of starving Cambodians would gather to sit around them and quietly watch. It was unthinkable to Luce that he and the news crew would simply eat in front of these shattered people, so he would pass the can of peanuts to the first Cambodian, who would take a single peanut and pass the can to the next person. That Cambodian would also take a single peanut and pass the can – and so it went around the circle until the can was empty.

### **Meeting Pol Pot**

After travelling with Rasen and Laurie, Luce went back to northeastern Cambodia through Thailand with a different television news crew for an even more dicey assignment – accepting an invitation to interview Pol Pot, known as Brother Number One, the head of the Khmer Rouge and the person most responsible for the death of some 1.7 million Cambodians during that reign of terror.

Actually, Luce isn't sure whether they were in Thailand or Cambodia at that point – the border, like the international politics concerning Thailand and the Khmer Rouge at that point, was ambiguous.

Upon reaching the Khmer Rouge camp, Pol Pot said you're just in time for dinner. It was chicken. How did Luce feel? “It's always a dilemma, what do you do if you meet someone truly evil? We ate the chicken.”

Over the course of a couple of hours, Pol Pot was gregarious, displaying a lot of charisma, but Luce kept thinking of the mass graves he had seen, the horrors of the Tuol Sleng torture center, and the photograph of Sokham Hing, a friend who disappeared into the killing fields, on display at the Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh.

Pol Pot denied that any of the bodies were Khmer Rouge victims; he asserted that all of those people had been killed by the Vietnamese. Watched by armed guards, Luce and his party did not argue, feeling with some justification that they would not have gotten out alive if they had.

In 1998, Luce joined the staff of Community Missions in Niagara Falls, an all-purpose charity that runs a homeless shelter, soup kitchen, and assistance for parolees and those with mental or emotional problems. As Director of Public Relations, Luce helps publicize and run various fundraisers: the Gospel Fest, the Lobster Fest, the Sweetheart dinner, the golf classic, the 5k walk, and the November auction of donated antiques and fine arts. Most mornings during the week, he and his assistant, one of the shelter residents, pick up donated food at local supermarkets and restaurants.

### **Not Decrepit**

Luce turned 80 last Sept. 20; he and Bonacci celebrated with a quiet dinner out. In May, they held a large party for 80 or 90 people at their apartment as a fundraiser for the Mission. Originally, the fundraising party was to celebrate Don and Mark's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary on May 31, but they didn't want to provoke any antigay response that might hurt the Mission. So they shifted the theme to Luce's birthday and took in about \$5,000 in donations. Their elderly neighbor was reportedly confused as to why there were two male figurines standing atop the cake.

Luce remembers that his mother Margaret kept working even after turning 65 – the family was quite poor – and he thought that was terrible, working when you're old and decrepit, she should have more common sense. But Margaret lived until she was 95 or 96, and now that Luce is 80, he finds his own views on work have changed. He has no plans to retire; indeed, he fears retirement.

"Golf would be incredibly boring," he says. "Without work, I would probably stay home, do puzzles and eat; it sounds like fun in the short run, but I would quickly get bored."

He's moving slower than in the past, the result in part of a hip replacement about ten years ago, and he has to watch his diet due to diabetes, but he is far from decrepit ("I'll charge you with deceiving people if you say I'm decrepit!"). He shrugs off the suggestion that he could get a comfortable job at a research institute somewhere; he's happy continuing his life as it is.

He's had the opportunity to work with wonderful people who faced incredible challenges, he says: Catholic refugees who fled communist North Vietnam, Saigon students who faced prison and torture for opposing the government in South Vietnam, families with AIDS in Cambodia, now the homeless and parolees in Niagara Falls.

Luce remembers that on one of his trips to Vietnam in 1973 or 1974, he was taken by jeep along the Ho Chi Minh trail, a dangerous journey considering that the

U.S. or South Vietnamese planes were still bombing it to interdict North Vietnamese supplies.

At one point their jeep approached a river but showed no signs of slowing down. Now what, thought Luce, do I tell the driver there's a river in front of us? Luce said nothing, the driver did not slacken his speed . . . and the jeep roared on, seemingly driving on water. A few inches below the surface of the water was a bridge, invisible from the air but solid, carrying the vehicle forward.

A great story – maybe even a metaphor for something, like how Luce has been able to follow his own path so clearly while many others never find the road. But Luce says that never occurred to him. It's just a story about what happened.

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## Why Syria's Assad Must Not Go – Yet

America's neocons and liberal war hawks still want a U.S. military intervention in Syria to enforce their "Assad must go" mantra, but President Obama has realized that such a "regime change" could bring the Islamic State to power, a worse predicament, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

The intractable, multidimensional civil war in Syria is as intractable, and immune to clean solutions, as it ever has been. The basic conundrum is that we loathe two players in the conflict, the Assad regime and ISIS, and would like to be rid of them both, but they are the two strongest players and each constitutes the most significant opposition to the other. This multilateral structure of the war, however frustrating and policy-complicating it may be, is for the foreseeable future inescapable.

We are reminded, especially by those in what passes for a secular opposition in Syria, that the regime is genuinely brutal, with its barrel-bombing of civilian areas and similarly inexcusable tactics. But making sound policy, by the United States or any other outside power, is not a simple matter of reading a brutality meter, and that was true even before the most recent act of unspeakable brutality by ISIS.

The most prudent, and least bad, U.S. policies toward Syria need to be based on

the assumption that Bashar al-Assad is not likely to go away any time soon. There are at least three reasons that policy should be based on that assumption.

One reason involves a pragmatic recognition of reality, in that Assad's departure is simply beyond the ability of the United States or any player inside Syria to bring about any time soon (barring a full-scale U.S. military intervention, which would be folly for a host of other reasons). There are soft and brittle parts in this regime, but it would be useful to recall how many predictions of the regime's demise since the Syrian war began have proven to be wrong.

A second reason is that in most conflicts it would be a prescription for failure, and/or for embarking on an incredibly costly enterprise, to take on simultaneously two different antagonists who are fighting against each other. Think about what World War II in Europe would be like if the United States had tried to take on Nazi Germany and the Stalinist USSR at the same time.

The repeatedly expressed hopes placed in a Syrian "moderate opposition" as an alternative winning horse to back in this contest have repeatedly been shown to be held in vain. This situation is not something that can be corrected with more voluminous aid or more alacrity in dispensing it.

If the dispensing has been measured and hesitant, that is an appropriate recognition of how with the fluid line-up of protagonists in this civil war, men and materiel easily move from one participant to another and get into what we would consider the wrong hands.

A third reason is that collapse of the current Syria regime under the pressure of war could easily mean the loss of the only structure separating Syria from anarchy that would be even worse than what exists there now. We should have learned some lessons in this regard from what happened in de-Baathicized Iraq and what is still happening today in Libya.

In recent months the Obama administration appears to have accepted an understanding of these realities and talks less than it did earlier about the ouster of Assad as a policy priority. Because of that, it has been criticized by some other governments in the region who have different priorities.

The United States needs to consider its own interests in setting its own priorities rather than bowing to the priorities of others. The Turks, for example, have their own particular issues with Assad and Turkey-specific concerns about any cooperation with the Syrian Kurds. Many Arabs, especially in the Arabian Peninsula, think of Syrian affairs the same way they think of many Middle Eastern affairs, viewing them in terms of sectarian conflicts and asking

first of all, "What's good for the Sunnis?" That is not the sort of question that should guide U.S. policy.

In the longer run, significant political change in Syria will be necessary for that country to have any hope of stability. Bashar Assad will not be atop any Syrian political order that is reasonably just and stable. But the near term is what we face now, and what needs to be navigated successfully before we ever get to the long term.

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